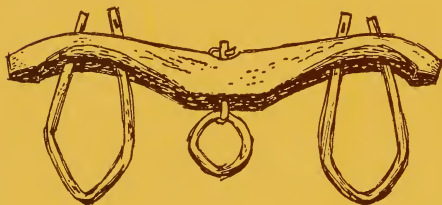


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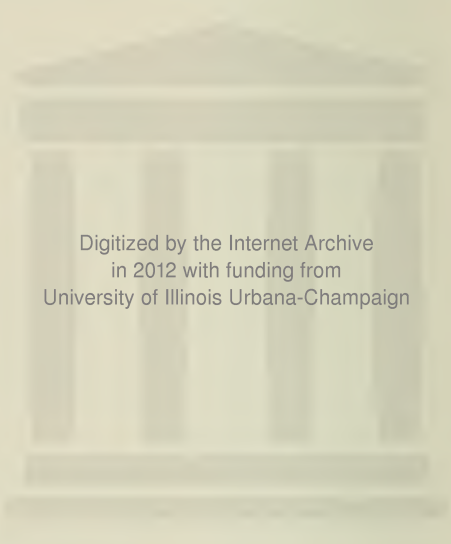
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CHRISTIAN WITHOUT A CREED



Some Remarks on
Abraham Lincoln's Religion
made by
David C. Mearns
before the Young People of
St. John's Parish
Lafayette Square, Washington, D. C.
at their regular
Sunday Evening Meeting,
February 13, 1955



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Early in the morning, a large crowd assembled at the depot of the Great Western Railroad. The day was Monday; the date, February 11th, 1861. The sky was dark and somber; the air, heavy with sorrow and unmistakable portent. Without distinction of race or class or party, this multitude had come together for a leave-taking.

In the center of the station office, a tall, awkward, familiar man took a place where, one by one, his townsmen might file by and shake his hand in silence. An observer remarked "the tearful eye, the tremulous lips and inaudible words"; another reported how "a subdued and respectful demeanor characterized the vast assemblage."

At precisely five minutes of eight o'clock the gayly decorated special train thundered down the track, its bell ringing, and came to a stop beside the door. It had begun to rain. The crowd fell back, making a passage-way. The tall man walked forward and mounted the steps of the car reserved for him.

Just then a carriage drove up; from it emerged a lady. She was the traveler's wife. She would join the caravan later. A Cincinnati sculptor offered her his arm and, holding an umbrella above her head, escorted her to a point where she could see and hear. The tall man stood, for

a moment, on the rear platform; he was visibly affected; there was a pause; then he turned to his bare-headed audience and slowly began to speak:

My friends, he said,—no one, not in my situation, can appreciate my feeling of sadness at this parting. To this place, and the kindness of these people, I owe every thing. Here I have lived a quarter of a century, and have passed from a young to an old man. Here my children have been born, and one is buried. I now leave, not knowing when, or whether ever, I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested on Washington. Without the assistance of that Divine Being, who ever attended him, I cannot succeed. With that assistance I cannot fail. Trusting in Him, who can go with me, and remain with you and be every where for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be well. To His care commending you, as I hope in your prayers you will commend me, I bid you an affectionate farewell.

It was eight o'clock; the train moved out of Springfield. But in the course of that long, circuitous, anxious journey which, in another time, might well have been comparable to a royal progress, the tall man, from street corners, hotel balconies, the rostrums of legislative halls, at flag-raising, and at whistle stops, would echo and reecho those feelings of a sober mission. To his intimates it seemed that change had come upon him.

Washington was both his destiny and his destination. He reached it on Saturday, February 23rd. The following morning, accompanied only by New York's Senator Seward, he passed through the Fourteenth Street door of Willard's Hotel and walked to St. John's Episcopal Church on H Street, where he was seated in pew No. 1, near the altar. He was not recognized. The oblivious Rector, Dr. Smith Pyne conducted the service, reading a rhymed Psalm:

Depend on God, and Him obey;
So thou within the land shall stay,
Secure from danger and from want:
Make His commands thy chief delight;
And He, thy duty to requite,
Shall all thy earnest wishes grant.
In all thy ways, trust thou the Lord,
And He will needful help afford
To perfect every just design:
He'll make, like light, serene and clear,
Thy clouded innocence appear,
And as a mid-day sun to shine.

The text of the sermon, that morning, was taken from I Corinthians 7:31: "And they that use this world, as not abusing it: for the fashion of this world passeth away." Dr. Pyne "made several allusions to the present state of the country and to the change in the Administration which was about to take place," but it was not until the service was concluded that Dr. Pyne was introduced to the stranger, "in plain black clothes, with black whiskers and hair well

trimmed," who, some of the ladies in the congregation pronounced, was "almost good-looking." His name, it developed, was Abraham Lincoln. He was President-elect of the United States.

Now the words spoken above the Springfield track, and his church attendance on that first Washington Sunday are in almost incredible contrast with the charges of unbelief which some have brought against Mr. Lincoln. They have accused him, these disparagers, of having been a deist, a theist, an atheist, an agnostic. They have produced evidence to support their aspersions; the evidence cannot lightly be dismissed. It is based upon the assertions of competent witnesses. But it can be controverted.

His youngest stepsister, Matilda Johnston More, once recorded Mr. Lincoln's boyhood custom: "When father and mother would go to church [she wrote] they walked about $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles. When they were gone—Abe would take down the Bible, read a verse—give out a hymn—and we would sing." As he grew older, his Biblical knowledge became so extensive and so exact, that his ability to recite chapter after chapter from memory and to correct misquotations from Holy Writ was a constant source of wonder to his friends. Noah Brooks believed that "he liked the Old Testament best, and dwelt on the simple beauty of the historical books." Perhaps, but an equally strong case for the Gospels,

and particularly for Matthew's Gospel, might easily be made. His speeches glimmer with passages from it.

And once, upon being presented with a Bible, he remarked:

In regard to this Great Book, I have but to say, it is the best gift God has given to man.

All the good the Saviour gave to the world was communicated through this book. But for it we could not know right from wrong. All things most desirable for man's welfare, here and hereafter, are to be found portrayed in it.

But it is alleged that as a youth, in New Salem, he came under the influence of the writings of Tom Paine and Constantin Volney, with the consequence that his convictions were utterly and permanently destroyed. It was at that time, so runs the insistent rumor, that Abraham Lincoln himself wrote a blasphemous work, which, following the earnest suasions of his friends, he finally agreed to consign to the fire.

This may or may not be so. Yet, the understanding of Abraham Lincoln depends on an understanding that maturity came slowly to him; he never stopped growing; in the process, he outgrew many things. His nature was profoundly emotional; his moods altered between ecstasy and despair; there was no accounting for them. He was a changeling.

It is not impossible that young Mr. Lincoln, like other brash adolescents, experienced a season

of self-conscious skepticism, but there is every reason to suppose that the season passed, and that, whatever his doubts persisting may have been, they were theological rather than religious.

Only once did Mr. Lincoln give public and personal expression of his convictions. That was in 1846, during his successful campaign for election to the national House of Representatives. His Democratic rival, the circuit-riding Peter Cartwright deliberately spread reports of Mr. Lincoln's infidelity. Mr. Lincoln replied with a handbill addressed to the voters of the Seventeenth Congressional District. It read:

A charge having got into circulation in some of the neighborhoods of this District, in substance that I am an open scoffer at Christianity, I have by the advice of some friends concluded to notice the subject in this form. That I am not a member of any Christian Church, is true; but I have never denied the truth of the Scriptures; and I have never spoken with intentional disrespect of religion in general, or of any denomination of Christians in particular. It is true that in early life I was inclined to believe in what I understand is called the "Doctrine of Necessity"—that is, that the human mind is impelled to action, or held in rest by some power, over which the mind itself has no control; and I have sometimes (with one, two or three, but never publicly) tried to maintain this opinion in argument—The habit of arguing thus however, I have entirely left off for more than five years—And I add here,

I have always understood this same opinion to be held by several of the Christian denominations. The foregoing is the whole truth, briefly stated, in relation to myself upon this subject.

I do not think I could myself, be brought to support a man for office, whom I knew to be an open enemy of, and scoffer at, religion.—Leaving the higher matter of eternal consequences, between him and his Maker, I still do not think any man has the right to insult the feelings, and injure the morals, of the community in which he may live.—If, then, I was guilty of such conduct, I should blame no man who should condemn me for it; but I do blame those, whoever they may be, who falsely put such a charge in circulation against me.

Admittedly the statement is less than satisfactory. In its undertone is an implication that Mr. Lincoln may have refrained from un-Christian utterances on the basis of stark political expediency. There were those who insisted that this deliberate abstinence from honest self-revelation continued throughout his life. One of them was his last law partner, William Henry Herndon, who was in no position to know the facts, and, what was worse, a creature of perverse prejudice. Wrote bumptious Bill Herndon airily:

Proclamations of Mr. Lincoln, while President of the United States, are quoted to show that he was a Christian. Mr. Lincoln was

the President of a Christian people, and he but used their ideas, language, speech and forms. So would Tom Paine have done had he been President of this free people. . . . Lincoln was very politic, and a very shrewd man in some particulars. When he was talking to a Christian, he adapted himself to the Christian.

This is nonsense; it is also infamous. It is true that Mr. Lincoln was first and foremost a politician. He practiced politics as a profession; he played politics as the national pastime. To him it was science, art, and way of life. He accepted it on its own terms. But never was he a charlatan, a masquerader, an impostor. Honest Abe had a reputation for forthrightness and personal deprecation. He had no talent for feigning to be what he was not.

Of course he was not, in a theological sense, orthodox. He never was baptized, never joined a church, never made a profession of faith, never affiliated himself with any denomination, never subscribed to any particular liturgy or ritual. At the height of the Southern Insurrection he confessed to a deputation from the Baltimore Synod: "I have often wished that I was a more devout man than I am." His wife, who admitted that he was not, as she put it, "a technical Christian," insisted that "He was a religious man always, as I think."

In Springfield and in Washington he was a

pewholder in a Presbyterian Church and commendably regular in attendance. Throughout his Presidency, he constantly received delegations from religious bodies. On such occasions his statements were eloquently reverent and obviously genuine expressions of his spirit. More, perhaps, than any public man in our history, his personality attracted the clergy of all faiths to himself and to his cause. His acquaintanceship with the clerics of the day was large. They came not to save him from perdition, but to draw renewed inspiration from a truly noble heart.

Dr. Smith Pyne, Rector of St. John's, held him in "deep and affectionate regard and respect." He would not have used such phrases in addressing a notorious unbeliever. Once when interceding for an Admiral, under a sentence of court martial, Dr. Pyne wrote to Mr. Lincoln: "Let me hope that one more item will be added to the amount of obligation and attachment by which I have long felt myself bound to you both in your official and personal character." There were scores of gentlemen of the cloth who felt just as did Dr. Pyne about the strange tenant of the White House.

In his first inaugural, Mr. Lincoln declared: "Intelligence, patriotism, Christianity, and a firm reliance on Him, who has never yet forsaken this favored land, are still competent to adjust, in the best way, all our present difficulty." But when the issue was joined, his reliance remained

firm; he accepted the defense of his cause with fatalistic resignation.

In the Fall of 1862, when considering the proclamation of Emancipation, Mr. Lincoln put down on paper this meditation on the Divine Will:

The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both *may* be, and one *must* be wrong. God can not be *for*, and *against* the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party—and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect His purpose. I am almost ready to say this is probably true—that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet. By His mere quiet power, on the minds of the now contestants, He could have either saved or destroyed the Union without a human contest. Yet the contest began. And having begun He could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds.

This fragment was “not written to be seen of men,” but, when he was interviewed by a minister of the Society of Friends, a few weeks later, he repeated the musing almost verbatim. Mrs. Lincoln was disposed to think that it was in that year, (their son, Willie, had died in its early months), that her husband's religious senses had

been most profoundly stirred. It would be progressive. The wife spoke with confidence when she said of him that "he felt religious more than ever before, about the time he went to Gettysburg."

Modern scholarship is inclined to agree that Mr. Lincoln's religious yearnings and aspirations were slowly adduced by his own and the nation's tragedy. The Rev. William E. Barton once put it this way:

The religion of Abraham Lincoln was part and parcel of his life; and his life was an evolution whose successive stages can be measured with reasonable certainty. Not only did his religious convictions develop and broaden under the stimuli of Lincoln's constantly broadening intellectual and spiritual environment, but they broadened in the growth of his own personality.

Carl Sandburg shares this view, writing:

A distinct trend toward a deeper religious note, a piety more assured of itself because more definitely derived from inner and private growths of Lincoln himself, this could be seen as the President from year to year fitted himself more deeply and awarely into the mantle and authorities of Chief Magistrate.

But the question persists: what *was* Mr. Lincoln's religion? His private secretary, John G. Nicolay, who knew him well, and who, throughout the Administration, lived and worked by his

side, a resident of the White House, has left an answer. Mr. Nicolay had intended one day to write an essay on "Abraham Lincoln's Faith in God." Among his papers is a note scribbled in pencil; it reads:

Finally to sum up the whole matter in default of sufficient positive or direct testimony—in default of specific impressions, of church membership, and the strict observance of church rites—yet in [the] presence of the unvarying enunciation of faith and reliance in a supreme ruler, in the practice of justice, of patriotism, of mercy—in the utter oblivion of self—"with malice toward none and charity for all"—the world can utter no other verdict than this—He was a Christian without a creed.

And we, of this century and this world, can say amen to that anonymity, and be ever grateful for the life which gave new and glowing meaning to a later Pilgrim's Progress.



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CHRISTIAN WITHOUT A CREED, SOME REMARKS



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